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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to gather information about the kinds of play engaged in by five- and six-year-old children. Two groups of kindergarten children, one from upper middle income families and the other from lower income families, were asked to name their favorite things to play with at home. Nine categories of home play preferences were identified. Four categories were preferred by children from both groups: dolls and stuffed animals, toys, outdoor play and games, and dramatic play. There were significant differences between the two groups. Although both groups chose dolls and stuffed animals most frequently, toys were the second most frequent choice for high income children, while low income children more frequently chose outdoor play. Dramatic play was named more frequently in the higher income group than in the lower. The play choices of children in this study reflected a blend of traditional and contemporary influences. (PCB)

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How Do Young Children Say They Play?
The Play Preferences of Five-and-Six-Year Old Children

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How Do Young Children Say They Play?

The Play Preferences of Five- and Six-Year Old Children

How do today's young children play? Does play serve a different purpose for this generation's children than it did for children in the past? Are the concerns that children's play is being adversely affected by television, organized sports and other contemporary influences verified by how children report that they play? This article discusses a recent study conducted with kindergarten children to determine their play preferences. The authors were interested in finding out how children's play choices reflect the heritage of past generations, as well as the influences of the world in which they live.

Play has served various purposes for different cultures and different times in history. Early Greek society centered on athletic games and competition. As a result, for two Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, play was part of life. During the Middle Ages when the church controlled society, games and play were considered to be sinful activities (Johnson and Levy, 1979). The Industrial Revolution from 1600-1800 separated children from adult life for the first time. With an understanding of childhood as a unique period of life, children engaged in their own play and were given toys of their own (Sutton-Smith, 1986). During the nineteenth century the Puritan influence against play as a form of idleness decreased and playgrounds and organized sports were developed to keep children off the street and to promote socially acceptable behavior. In the United States this type of play was one response to the influx of immigrant children living in northeastern cities.

Since World War II a more comprehensive understanding of play has developed. Johnson and Levy (1979) observed that play has become more child-centered with the purpose of providing for freedom, self-directed activities, and imaginative play. According to Sutton-Smith (1986), "the history of the twentieth century can be written as an illustration of

the gradual socialization of children's leisure to bring it from the more unruly folkways of the nineteenth century into the more domesticated forms of that organized and adult-influenced recreation, sport and play with which we are now familiar" (232).

Within recent decades, there has been an escalating concern about the changing nature of children's play. As a result, Sutton-Smith and others have studied the nature of children's play and how play is affected by social and commercial influences. Sutton-Smith believes that play today is more solitary, is influenced by commercial advertising, especially on television, and is affected by the economic affluence of many of the children in this country.

Devereaux (1975) reported a study of game preferences of American children over a sixty-year period that concluded that the traditional games of childhood are vanishing. Games such as red rover, leap frog, and marbles are disappearing or have been replaced by organized sports. Devereaux expressed concern that the adult-sponsored sports culture has invaded the natural play of childhood. Robin Moore (1986) echoed the information that traditional games are disappearing; however, Moore called for research to determine whether the games have disappeared or been transformed into a current version.

The role of commercial toys on children's play particularly those advertised on television, is questioned by some. In Toys as Culture, Sutton-Smith (1986) examined whether children play innovatively with these toys or use them in a mechanical manner. While Sutton-Smith concluded that there is no evidence that children play less creatively with current toys, the International Association for the Child's Right to Play has advocated against one type of commercial toy, those that are associated with war. As a result of its concern for the influence of the toys on children's play, the organization took a position against adults providing war toys for children (IPA Newsletter, January, 1981).

The most common controversy over the changing nature of children's play has revolved around the influence of television and electronic toys and games. Some researchers tried to determine whether TV viewing is replacing or changing the type of play engaged in by children (Bettelheim, 1976; Winn, 1977). There is also a concern that television programs that feature aggression have resulted in aggressive or stereotypic play themes in the free play of preschoolers.

Sutton-Smith (1985) concluded that the shift in play has been steady. He proposed that the constant variety provided by toys, games and television causes children to be distracted and repeatedly move from one play activity to another. Toys have become more mechanized and increasingly electronic in character. A most significant change is that play is becoming more isolated. Perhaps Sutton-Smith (1986) best summarized current thought on the nature of children's play in the following statement: "The typical scene in many modern homes is of the child playing in front of the television set with a television advertised toy" (p. 231).

Much of the research conducted to date has been based on adult perceptions of child play. Our interest focused on what children themselves reported as their play choices. In 1926 Lehman and Witty, (1927) gathered information about the kinds of play engaged in by children ages five to eight. Our study was designed to gather similar types of information from five- and six-year-old children growing up in the high-tech society of the 1980's.

Is television influencing children into playing less thought provoking games? Are children still playing imaginary and traditional games as we did when we were children? Does the economic status of the family affect the kind of play engaged in by the children?

In our survey, 119 kindergarten children were sampled from four different schools in San Antonio, Texas. The first group consisted of 61 children from upper middle income families. The second group of 58 children were from lower income families. The children were surveyed individually by their teacher. They were asked to name their five favorite things to play at home and at school. The teachers were instructed not to prompt or guide the children at any time in how they should respond. For this report only the five responses for play preferences at home were analyzed. Responses were listed and then placed in categories of responses (Table 1). Frequency of responses were tallied and percentages of responses were calculated and ranked from highest to lowest. The nine home play preference categories were defined as follows: (1) Dolls and stuffed animals; (2) Toys; (3) Outdoor play; (4) Dramatic play; (5) Manipulatives and educational activities; (6) Activities with other people; (7) Indoor games; (8) Television; and (9) Miscellaneous activities.

Analysis of the responses by categories determined that both groups of children preferred four categories for play: dolls and stuffed animals, toys, outdoor play and games, and dramatic play. There were significant differences, however, between the groups. Both groups named dolls and stuffed animals most frequently [Group A (21%) and Group B (28%)]. Toys were the second most frequent choice for higher income children, who also named dramatic play more frequently (14%) than lower income children (7%). A higher percentage of lower income children (Group B) preferred outdoor play and games (27%) than higher income children (Group A) (18%).

Insert Table 1 here

Table 1

GROUP A (Upper Middle Income)

PLAY PREFERENCE AT HOME		61 CHILDREN SURVEYED	
1.	Dolls and stuffed animals	64	21%
2.	Toys	57	19%
3.	Outdoor play and games	55	18%
4.	Dramatic play	42	14%
5.	Manipulatives and educational activities	22	7%
6.	Activities with other people	22	7%
7.	Indoor games	19	6%
8.	Miscellaneous activities	13	4%
9.	Television and video games	11	4%
	TOTAL	* 305	100%

GROUP B (Lower Income)

PLAY PREFERENCE AT HOME		58 CHILDREN SURVEYED	
1.	Dolls and stuffed animals	80	28%
2.	Outdoor play and games	77	27%
3.	Toys	38	13%
4.	Dramatic play	27	9%
5.	Activities with other people	21	7%
6.	Manipulatives and educational activities	18	6%
7.	Miscellaneous activities	12	4%
8.	Television and video games	9	3%
9.	Indoor games	8	3%
	TOTAL	* 290	100%

* The totals reflect 5 play choices for each child.

Interestingly, neither group of children rated television as a strong play preference. Out of 119 kindergarten children surveyed, only 20 chose television as a preference. Even the upper middle SES children who would probably have more access to cable channels chose television less frequently than any other category.

A study of the toys and games choices of the children, however, gives contradictory evidence of the influence of television. The majority of the toys, dolls and stuffed animals named are heavily advertised on TV or are products related to children's cartoons (Tables 2 & 3). This finding is consistent with Sutton-Smith's evidence that a great deal more of children's play is now associated with toys advertised through television commercials (1986).

Sutton-Smith also proposed that the wealthier the child, the more likely he/she would be engaged in indoor play with all kinds of toys. In our study the children from more affluent homes listed more types of stuffed animals, dolls, and toys (Tables 2&3) and selected outdoor play less frequently, while lower income children listed a larger variety of outdoor types of play, which they chose more frequently than upper income children (Table 4). Nevertheless, the most frequent outdoor play choices for both groups were riding bicycles, swinging and playing hide and seek and traditional games.

There were differences between the two groups in dramatic play (Table 5). Higher income children selected dramatic play activities more frequently, and named a richer variety of types of dramatic play; however, both groups selected traditional play themes such as "house", "school", "store", or "policeman", more frequently than television show or toy related themes such as "Voltron", or "Rainbow Brite".

Insert Tables 2 & 3 here

Insert Tables 4 & 5 here

Table 2

DOLLS AND STUFFED ANIMALS

GROUP A (Upper Middle Income)		GROUP B (Lower Income)	
Barbies	10	Transformers	13
Transformers	8	Stuffed Animals	10
Cabbage Patch Dolls	6	Dolls	10
Dolls	4	Barbies	9
Stuffed Animals	4	G.I. Joe	7
He Man	4	Cabbage Patch Dolls	7
Rainbow Brite	3	My Little Pony	5
G.I. Joe	3	Thunder Cats	2
Go Bots	3	Go Bots	2
Care Bears	2	Care Bears	2
Pound Puppies	2	Rainbow Brite	2
Thunder Cats	2	He Man	2
Princess of Power	1	Voltron	1
Hug a Bunch	1	Shera Doll	1
Baby Pony	1	Cobra	1
Baby Rainbow Brite	1	Big Foot	1
Baby Hugs	1	Dyno-Bots	1
Tiny Bear	1	Rubber snake	1
Super Friends	1	Robots	1
Captain Cosmo	1	Super Friends	1
Ken Doll	1	Sesame Str. Big Bird	1
Golden Girl	1	TOTAL	80
Wooden Duck	1		
Toy Fish	1		
Play Men	1		
TOTAL	64		

Table 3

TOYS

Group A		Group B	
Trucks	10	Play Cars	12
Cars	9	Trucks	7
My toys	5	Trains	3
Blocks	4	Guns	3
Constructo Blocks	2	Motorcycles	2
Legos	2	Tractors	2
Castle Grey Skull	2	Airplanes	2
Space Shuttle	2	Legos	2
Toy Boat	2	Constructos	1
Greyhound Bus	2	Toys	1
Train Track	1	Chrystal Castle	1
Barbies' House	1	Yo-Yo	1
Boat	1	Remote Control Car	1
Cabbage Patch House	1	TOTAL	38
Crack Up Cars	1		
Tractors	1		
Space Set	1		
Motor Toy	1		
Balloons	1		
Play Lawn Mower	1		
Play Dragon	1		
Gun	1		
Airplanes	1		
Drums	1		
Helicopters	1		
Toy Box	1		
Fire Engine	1		
TOTAL	57		

Table 4

OUTDOOR PLAY AND GAMES

GROUP A (Upper Middle Income)	
Ride Bikes	9
Hide and Seek	8
Go Outside	6
Swings	7
Soccer	4
Baseball	3
Football	2
Play Tag	2
Follow the Leader	1
Golf	1
Chinese Jump Rope	1
Turn cartwheels	1
Run	1
Volleyball	1
Climb a pole	1
Play ball	1
Duck, Duck, Goose	1
Monkey bars	1
Jump rope	1
TOTAL	52

GROUP B Lower (Lower Income)	
Ride bikes	19
Swings	8
Hide and Seek	6
Balls	6
Jump rope	5
Soccer	4
Baseball	4
Football	4
Fly kites	3
Play outside	2
Rollerskate	2
Kickball	1
Freeze Tag	1
Basketball	1
Go to the park	1
Hula Hoop	1
Gymnastics	1
Karate	1
Tee Ball	1
Volleyball	1
Duck, Duck, Goose	1
Tether Ball	1
Ring Around Rosie	1
Marbles	1
Swimming	1
TOTAL	77

Table 5

DRAMATIC PLAY

GROUP A (Upper Middle Income)	
Play house	9
Play school	7
Play "Mask" (Cartoon)	3
Dress up	3
Play "Voltron" (Cartoon)	3
Play like a baby	2
Play teacher	1
Play Real Warriors	1
Wolf chases pig	1
"Don't talk to?"	1
Play army	1
Act like an elephant	1
Play Rainbow Brite	1
Cops and Robbers	1
Play Karate	1
Backyard He Man	1
Play policeman	1
Play store	1
Play shoe store	1
Play w/bracelets	1
Play Indiana Jones	1
TOTAL	42

GROUP B Lower (Lower Income)	
Play house	9
Play school	5
Play monster	2
Play store	2
Mask Cartoon	1
Spaceman	1
Play rodeo	1
Play war	1
Play army	1
Cowboys and Indians	1
Play like a puppy	1
Break dancing	1
Play w/purse	1
TOTAL	27

Summary

Five- and six year old children in this study reported that they still engage in similar types of play as children of earlier decades. Although the toys they play with demonstrated the influence of television and television advertising, the children surveyed said that they choose other forms of play activities more frequently than viewing television or playing video games.

There did seem to be some differences between upper and lower income children. Children from affluent families had a larger variety of toys and preferred playing with those toys. Lower income children named dolls and stuffed animals as their most frequent play choice, but outdoor play ranked second.

Contemporary five- and six-year-olds still engage in some traditional forms of play. They named culturally transmitted games among their play choices; moreover, they named traditional dramatic play themes more frequently than television or movie influenced themes in dramatic play choices.

Despite the concerns expressed by many writers about undesirable changes in children's play, the children in this study reflected a blend of tradition and contemporary influences in their play choices. Although they participate in the changing attractions of high tech possibilities, they reported that they also choose the kinds of activities that children have played for many generations.

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